The Award for World's Worst Parents goes to...
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The Award for World's Worst Parents goes to...

by KryptonianHero

Summary

Kara Zor-El knew all about her Uncle Jor-El's batshit crazy plan for Kal-El.

Clark wanted to know why she never told him, why he had to learn from Lex Luthor, of all people.

Kara Zor-El knew all about her Uncle Jor-El's batshit crazy plan for Kal-El because it was her father's plan too.

Notes

This started out as a one shot about Clark confronting Kara about the message, because I wanted to deal with the concept of her knowing the truth and not telling Clark.

It ended up becoming a three chapter fic focusing on Kara's trauma and Lois becoming a sort of maternal/big sister figure to Kara.

Chapter 1

Clark Kent sat in the central chair of the newly repaired Fortress of Solitude, the restored sunbeam mechanism pouring a steady column of golden light down from the crystalline ceiling. The air hummed faintly with the quiet industry of the Superman robots as they moved through the vast chamber, sealing fractures in the walls, recalibrating consoles, and restoring order to a place that had been brutally violated only days before.

Four, the robot closest to him, administered repairs to Clark's damaged suit, while Clark inspected the patchwork repairs on its damaged plating. The welds were rough, functional, but they gave the otherwise pristine machine an unexpected humanity.

"Got this place cleaned up pretty good," Clark said, his voice soft, almost wondering. He tilted his head, studying the robot's head injury, "cleaned yourself up pretty good, too."

Four reached up with mechanical fingers, touching the scar self-consciously, if such a thing were possible for a robot, "you think so?"

"Yeah," Clark replied, a small, tired smile touching his lips, "I think it gives you character."

Four paused, processing the compliment in its own quiet way, "maybe, one day, you'll give me a name."

Clark frowned, genuinely puzzled, "well, Four's a name."

Four's voice remained perfectly deadpan, "so is Gary."

Clark opened his mouth to respond, some gentle rebuttal already forming, when a sudden, violent crash echoed from deep within one of the side corridors. Metal screeched against crystal. Something heavy toppled. Then another crash, followed by a cascade of smaller impacts.

"Aw, shoot," a familiar voice muttered, muffled but unmistakable.

Four turned its head toward the sound, "sir, I think your cousin has returned."

Clark exhaled slowly, the weariness settling deeper into his bones, "yup."

He stayed seated, hands resting on the arms of the chair, watching the hallway entrance. The robots continued their work without pause, but the chamber felt suddenly smaller, as though the air itself were bracing for impact.

Then she appeared.

Kara Zor-El stumbled out of the shadowed corridor and into the central chamber, swaying slightly as she caught her balance. Soot streaked her face in uneven smears, clinging to her cheekbones and forehead like war paint. Her costume—similar to Clark's but distinctly hers, with the shorter skirt and taller boots—was half-hidden beneath a tattered, grimy brown coat that looked like it had been dragged through something disgusting. The coat hung open, flapping as she moved. Her blonde hair, although you couldn't tell it was blonde, due to the amount of muck that coated it, was tangled, strands stuck to her soot-dusted skin. Her eyes were bloodshot, the pupils a little too wide, the lids heavy with exhaustion and something stronger.

She raised both arms in an exaggerated, unsteady wave.

"What the hell, dude?" Kara's voice was hoarse, slurred at the edges. She jerked a thumb over her shoulder toward the hallway she'd just demolished, "why did you move the door?"

Clark lifted one hand and pointed, calm and precise, toward the actual entrance on the opposite side of the chamber—the one that had always been there.

"I didn't move the door."

Kara squinted in the direction he indicated, blinked slowly, then shrugged as if the entire Fortress had personally conspired against her. She wiped a hand across her mouth, smearing more soot.

"Hey," she said, scanning the room with unfocused urgency, "where is my dog?"

Before Clark could answer, a white streak shot across the ceiling. Krypto launched himself from his bed with unrestrained joy, barreling straight into Kara's chest with a resounding thud that echoed through the chamber like a gunshot. The impact would have shattered a human ribcage, but Kara only fell back, arms instinctively wrapping around the dog as he seized the scruff of her filthy coat in his teeth

Krypto dragged her forward, then down. Kara hit the floor hard

enough to send spiderweb cracks radiating outward. The stone dented beneath her with a sharp crack. Dust and crystal shards puffed into the air. Yet she laughed—high, breathless, giddy laughter that rang off the walls as Krypto pinned her, tail wagging furiously, licking soot from her face with enthusiastic slobber.

Clark watched the chaos unfold, one hand rubbing slow circles over his temple, “okay,” he sighed, voice heavy with resignation, “well, this is why he has behavioral issues.”

Four tilted its head, observing the scene with mechanical detachment, “no boundaries,” it said, shaking its head in mild disapproval, “it’s not healthy, is it?”

Clark only hummed in response, his gaze never leaving Kara.

She finally managed to push herself up to a sitting position, still giggling as she wrestled Krypto into a rough hug. The dog’s entire body vibrated with happiness, paws scrabbling against her coat. Kara ruffled his ears, planted a kiss on his head, then hauled herself unsteadily to her feet. Crystal dust cascaded from her shoulders.

“Come on,” she said to Krypto, voice lighter now, almost affectionate beneath the slur. She turned toward the hallway she’d entered through—still the wrong one—and gestured for the dog to follow. Krypto bounded ahead, pausing to look back at her expectantly. Kara flicked a lazy, two-fingered salute in Clark’s direction without fully turning around, “thanks for watching him, bitch!”

Kara’s voice echoed off the crystalline walls, light and careless, as she turned fully toward the hallway. Krypto bounded ahead of her, tail whipping the air, already eager to leave the Fortress behind. She took one step, then another, the dented floor crunching faintly under her boots.

“Kara.”

Clark’s voice was quiet, but it carried the weight of something immovable. She stopped mid-stride, shoulders stiffening. Krypto paused too, glancing back with a soft whine. Kara didn’t turn around right away. She let out a slow breath that fogged in the cold air, then pivoted on her heel, one eyebrow arched in exaggerated patience.

“What now? I’ve got a shuttle to catch.”

Clark rose from the central chair. The sunlight pouring through the

restored mechanism painted him in gold, but his face was shadowed, eyes fixed on her with an intensity she hadn't seen directed at her before. Four and the other robots continued their work in silence, discreetly moving to the edges of the chamber as if sensing the shift in atmosphere.

"I need to ask you something," Clark said. His voice was steady, but there was a tremor beneath it—something raw trying to stay contained, "and for once, I just need you to be serious. No jokes. I need you to look at me and be honest."

Kara's smirk faltered. She crossed her arms over her grimy coat, shifting her weight, "okay… that's ominous. Shoot."

Clark took a slow step forward, "I finally heard the complete message. The one my… my parents recorded for me. The part that was corrupted, the part I never heard before… I finally heard it all."

He watched her face carefully. Kara's expression didn't change much, but something flickered behind her eyes—recognition, maybe dread.

"I know what they really said," he continued, "what they really intended for me to do when I grew up. And I need to know… did you know?"

The chamber went utterly still. Even the faint hum of the robots seemed to fade.

Kara's gaze dropped to the floor for a long second. She didn't answer. She didn't need to. The silence stretched, heavy and damning.

Clark's breath caught, "you did, didn't you?"

Kara lifted her eyes again, jaw tight. Still no words.

"How long?" he asked, voice cracking on the question, "how long have you known?"

She exhaled sharply through her nose, "long enough."

"Before the end?" he pressed, "before Krypton—"

"Yes," she cut in, voice low, "before Krypton died. I knew."

Clark stared at her as if seeing her for the first time, "you knew? You knew my parents wanted me to… to *conquer* this planet? To subjugate humanity. To… *breed* a new master race," the words tasted like ash in

his mouth, “and you never said anything?”

Kara shrugged, but the motion was stiff, defensive, “I mean, they were always a little nuts, Kal. Even by Kryptonian standards. Everyone knew Jor-El had… *ideas*. Extreme ideas, on how to survive. But you were raised here. By decent people. So I figured you’d never listen to that garbage anyway.”

“That’s not your call to make!” Clark’s voice rose, echoing sharply. Krypto whimpered and slunk behind Kara, “you decided for me what I could handle. You let me build my entire life—my entire identity—around a lie!”

“I was trying to protect you!” Kara shot back, heat entering her tone for the first time, “you were just a baby when you left. You didn’t see what I saw. You didn’t watch people you love die, screaming on a chunk of rock drifting through space. You didn’t have to grow up knowing your entire world was gone because the adults in charge were too arrogant to listen! So why would I dump their insane manifesto on you when it wouldn’t change anything?”

“It changed everything!” Clark shouted. He took another step toward her, hands clenched at his sides, “I stood in front of the entire world and told them my family sent me here to protect them. That Krypton believed in humanity. That they sent me here because they thought this planet was worth saving. And the whole time—the whole damn time—it was the opposite!”

Kara flinched.

“And I had to learn the truth from Lex Luthor,” Clark continued, voice shaking with fury and hurt, “from *him*. He broke in here, took the video, repaired it, and broadcast it to everyone on Earth. People felt betrayed, Kara. They were terrified of me. They locked me in a pocket dimension because they were scared I was finally going to do what my parents told me to do.”

He laughed once, bitter and broken.

“And while I was trapped, while Lois and Michael risked their lives to get me out… where were you? Off getting drunk in some dive bar.”

Kara’s face flushed dark with anger, “don’t you dare judge me, Kal-El. You don’t get to judge how I cope. You got the fairy-tale version—loving parents, a normal childhood, a perfect life. I got the end of everything I love. I watched everyone I knew die slowly. So yeah,

sometimes I drink until I can't feel it anymore. Sue me."

"This isn't about coping!" Clark roared, "this is about trust! You're the only biological family I have left. The *only* one who shares my blood, my history. And yet you kept this from me. You let me walk into that betrayal blind."

"I didn't think you'd ever have to hear it!" she yelled back, defensively, "I thought it would stay buried with the rest of the wreckage!"

"Well it didn't!" His voice cracked like thunder in the chamber, "and now the whole world knows what monsters our people were—and by extension, what I might have been. And the one person who could have prepared me, warned me, helped me process it… said nothing."

Kara opened her mouth, closed it again. For once, she had no comeback.

Clark's chest heaved. He stared at her—at the soot, the tattered coat, the bloodshot eyes—and felt something inside him fracture. He shook his head before turning away.

"I… I think it's best if you leave, Kara," he said quietly.

The words hung in the air, soft but final.

Kara blinked, "what?"

He met her gaze, steady and unwavering, "I don't want to see you right now. Not if I can't trust you."

She stared at him, genuinely stunned, "wait, you're… serious?"

"Completely."

Kara's mouth twisted, half anger, half disbelief, "what about Krypto? When I'm off-world, who's going to—"

Clark let out a short, humorless laugh and shook his head, looking at her with open disappointment, "that's it? That's all you have to say? I just told you that you betrayed me—betrayed everything I've tried to stand for—and the only thing you worry about is who's going to dogsit when it's convenient for you."

Kara's eyes flashed, "that's not—"

“You still don’t get it,” he said, turning away from her, “just go.”

Krypto whined again, looking between them, confused and anxious. Kara stood frozen for a long moment, the silence stretching until it felt unbearable. Finally, she reached down and scratched the dog’s ears once, roughly. Then she straightened, coat flapping as she turned toward the exit—the correct one this time.

She didn’t look back as she walked away, boots echoing against the crystal floor until the sound faded into nothing.

Clark sank back into the central chair, the golden sunlight suddenly feeling cold against his skin. Four approached hesitantly, but he raised a hand, asking for solitude.

The Fortress, for the first time in years, felt truly empty.

Lois Lane stood at the window of the Daily Planet bullpen, coffee long gone cold in her hand, watching the cranes swing against a gray December sky. Four months had passed since Lex Luthor tore open that dimensional rift and very nearly split Metropolis in two. The scar was still there—literally. A jagged fissure ran through the city, cordoned off with orange barriers and warning signs, while construction crews worked around the clock to get things back to the way it used to be. The mayor had been blunt in his last press conference: full repairs would take at least two more years, even with the flood of money and materials from Wayne Enterprises and the tireless labor of the Justice Gang.

Metropolis was healing, but slowly, like a bone that had been set wrong and needed to be re-broken first. Entire blocks along the riverfront were still wrapped in scaffolding. The historic Hobbs Bay Bridge had a temporary replacement that groaned every time a truck crossed it. And every so often, on quiet nights, people swore they could hear the city shifting.

But life, stubborn as ever, kept moving forward.

The Planet had finally stopped running daily updates on Lex’s imprisonment to Belle Reve or the latest congressional hearing about “The Incident.” Perry had declared an unofficial moratorium on the

word “rift” unless it was accompanied by fresh, verifiable reporting. Instead, the front page that morning carried a photo of Hawkgirl outside the United Nations, while diplomats argued over whether her execution of Boravian dictator Vasil Ghurkos was an act of war. Below the fold: a lighter piece about Superman preventing a runaway train from plunging into the Suicide Slum ravine.

Normal superhero chaos, in other words.

Lois turned from the window and walked back to her desk, weaving through the familiar controlled pandemonium of the newsroom. Phones rang, keyboards clacked, someone shouted for a copy editor. Jimmy was hunched over his desk, cropping photos from yesterday’s toy drive at the children’s hospital. Perry’s door was closed—he was on a call with the Gotham Gazette about shared coverage of the upcoming inter-city charity gala Bruce Wayne was hosting.

She dropped into her chair and stared at the blank document open on her screen. She was supposed to be writing a follow-up on public trust in metahuman responders, but the cursor just blinked at her, patient and accusing.

Four months.

Four months since Clark had come back from that pocket dimension pale and quiet, the weight of the world—literally—on his shoulders. Four months since the broadcast of Jor-El’s restored message had turned Superman from beacon of hope into potential conqueror in the eyes of half the planet. Four months since governments had panicked, and Lois had watched the man she loved be treated like the very threat he spent his life stopping.

And four months since she’d seen or heard anything about Kara Zor-El.

Lois rubbed her temples. She hadn’t asked Clark about his cousin directly—not after the first few weeks, when any mention of Krypton seemed to shut him down. But the absence was noticeable. Krypto still came occasionally, but he always arrived alone now, rocketing in from wherever Kara had left him. No hungover Supergirl stumbling through. No sarcastic quips. Just the dog, and Clark’s careful silence whenever Lois tried to nudge the subject.

She understood why he was angry. God, she did. Learning that your parents—your mythic, perfect, dead parents—had sent you to Earth not to save it but to rule it… that would break anyone. And learning it

from Lex Luthor, of all people, after the entire world had heard it too? That was salt ground deep into the wound.

But Kara…

Lois had only met her a handful of times, usually in the middle of some crisis that required two Kryptonians and left no time for small talk. What she remembered was a young woman who carried her grief like armor—sharp, spiked, designed to keep everyone at a distance. Kara laughed loudest when things were worst, drank hardest when memories crept too close, and disappeared for weeks at a time without warning. Lois had seen the pain underneath it all, the kind that didn't heal neatly.

Clark, raised with love and stability, had become the best of them. Kara had become something harder to define.

Lois sighed and finally started typing.

Public opinion polls showed a steady climb in Superman's favorability ratings. After the rift, people had started to remember why they'd trusted him in the first place. The toy drive photos were gold—Clark in the suit, kneeling to hand a little girl a stuffed bear while she stared up at him like he'd hung the moon. Social media was flooded with *#ThankYouSuperman* again. Even the talking heads on cable had moved on to fresher outrage.

He was earning it back, one rescued cat and one saved city block at a time.

But Lois knew him better than anyone. She saw the new lines around his eyes when he thought no one was looking. She heard the way his laugh didn't quite reach full volume anymore. And she noticed how, on the nights when the apartment felt too quiet, he'd look out the window and stare up at the stars like he was searching for something that wasn't there.

She saved the draft. It was almost lunch, and Clark had promised to meet her on the roof. These days he flew in as himself more often than in the cape, just to remind people he was still Clark Kent, reporter, too.

Lois grabbed her coat and headed for the elevator. The city hummed below her as the elevator ascended, construction noise and traffic and life going on, resilient as ever.

Metropolis would heal. The scars would fade, eventually.

Later that evening, the temperature had dropped sharply. December 16th, just over a week until Christmas. Lois trudged up the exterior stairs to her apartment building, grocery bag in one arm, keys already in her gloved hand. Snow flurries danced in the cones of light cast by the old-fashioned lamps along the railing, melting the moment they touched the ground. The streets were quieter than usual—holiday parties starting early, people already fleeing to family in warmer states.

Clark wasn't with her.

He'd called—or rather, shouted—earlier that afternoon, the voicemail crackling with wind rush and the unmistakable roar of supersonic flight.

"*Hey, Lois—it's me. Something's come up in Gotham. Batman… again. The GCPD thinks they've finally gothim, and they're… well, they're not asking nicely. I've gotta go make sure nobody does anything stupid. I'll be back as soon as I can. Love you.*"

She'd played it three times on the cab ride home, half amused, half exasperated.

Batman.

Honestly. She still wasn't convinced the guy was real. Despite being around for four years, there were no credible photos, no reliable eyewitness accounts beyond "pointy ears" and "disappears like smoke." The Gotham City Police Department flip-flopped weekly between insisting he was nothing more than an urban legend and blaming him for every unsolved crime in the city. Half the reporters at the Planet had a running betting pool on whether he was a hoax, a government psy-op, or just a very committed performance artist.

Either way, it meant Clark was spending the night in Gotham trying to keep a myth from getting shot by overzealous cops, and Lois was spending it alone.

She let herself into the apartment, kicking the door shut behind her with one heel. The place was dark except for the multicolored glow of the small Christmas tree she'd put up in the corner last weekend—Clark had helped string the lights, laughing when she'd insisted on the mismatched ornaments she'd collected over years of lonely holidays. The apartment smelled faintly of pine and the cinnamon candle she'd

burned the night before.

She flicked on the kitchen light, set the grocery bag on the counter, and shrugged out of her coat. She was halfway through pulling out a skillet to heat up leftover chili when the prickle started at the back of her neck—the unmistakable feeling of being watched.

Lois froze, hand still on the cupboard door.

Slowly, she turned.

The living room was dim, lit only by the tree's soft, shifting colors—red, green, blue, gold—washing over the furniture in gentle waves. And there, on the sofa, sat a figure.

Smaller than Clark. Slouched forward, elbows on knees, hands loosely clasped. Head bowed slightly, blonde hair falling across her face like a curtain. She wore a dark hoodie pulled up, jeans, heavy boots. The multicolored lights played across her profile, catching on the sharp line of her cheekbone.

Kara Zor-El.

She didn't move when Lois saw her. Didn't speak. Just sat there, staring at the Christmas tree as though the blinking lights held answers to questions Lois couldn't begin to guess.

Lois let out a slow breath, "you know… most people knock."

Kara's shoulders lifted in the barest shrug. Her voice, when it came, was rough, "door was locked. Window wasn't."

Lois glanced toward the living room window. It was closed now, latched. Not a mark on it. Of course.

She set the skillet down quietly and walked into the living room, stopping a few feet from the sofa. Up close, Kara looked worse than Lois had feared. The hoodie was oversized, sleeves frayed. Her face was thinner, cheekbones sharper, eyes ringed with exhaustion that went deeper than sleepless nights. There was a faint tremor in her fingers, quickly hidden when she noticed Lois looking.

"How long have you been here?" Lois asked.

Kara's gaze stayed on the tree. A blue light flickered across her face, then red, "couple hours. Maybe more. Lost track."

Lois studied her for a long moment, then moved to the armchair opposite and sat down.

“You hungry?” Lois tried.

Kara shook her head once.

“Thirsty?”

Another shake.

Lois leaned forward, elbows on her knees, mirroring Kara’s posture without thinking, “Clark’s not here. He’s in Gotham. Something about —”

“I know,” Kara interrupted quietly, “I heard the message.”

Of course she had. Super-hearing. She probably heard it from orbit.

Silence settled again, thick and uncomfortable. The tree lights blinked on, cycle complete, starting over.

Lois tried again, “Kara… are you okay?”

Kara let out a sound—half laugh, half scoff—that held no humor at all, “define okay.”

She finally lifted her head and looked at Lois. Her eyes were bloodshot, but dry. Too dry, like she’d run out of tears a long time ago.

“I didn’t come here to talk to him,” Kara said, “I just… didn’t have anywhere else to go tonight.”

Lois’s heart twisted. She kept her voice steady, “you’re welcome here. Always. You know that.”

Kara’s mouth twisted, bitter, “pretty sure Clark would disagree.”

“He’s hurt,” Lois said carefully, “he’s processing a lot. But he doesn’t hate you. And besides, last time I checked, this was *my* apartment, not his.”

Kara looked away again, back to the lights, “doesn’t matter.”

“It does.”

“Not tonight it doesn’t.”

The words hung between them. Outside, snow tapped gently against the window.

Lois stood up slowly. “I’m heating up chili. There’s plenty. And I’ve got hot chocolate—the good kind, with the little marshmallows Ma Kent sent. You don’t have to talk. You don’t have to do anything. But you’re staying.”

Kara didn’t answer, but she didn’t leave either.

Lois went back to the kitchen, moving quietly, giving the younger woman space. She stirred the chili, set out two bowls just in case, started the milk for cocoa. Every so often she glanced into the living room. Kara hadn’t moved. She just sat there, bathed in the soft glow of the tree, watching the lights shift and change like she was trying to memorize them.

When the cocoa was ready—steaming, topped with a small mountain of miniature marshmallows—Lois ladled chili into one bowl for herself and carried the mug and the second bowl into the living room anyway. She wasn’t going to force food on Kara, but she’d be damned if she let the girl sit there with nothing warm in her hands.

She rounded the corner and stopped.

Kara’s shoulders were shaking.

Not the dramatic, heaving sobs Lois might have expected. These were small, almost silent, as if Kara were trying to keep them inside and failing. Her face was turned down, hidden behind the fall of her hair, but tears tracked silver paths through the lingering soot on her cheeks, catching the Christmas lights like tiny prisms. One drop fell from her chin and landed on the knee of her jeans, darkening the fabric.

Lois set the bowl and mug carefully on the coffee table and sat on the ottoman directly in front of her, close enough to reach but not crowding.

“Kara,” she said softly.

Kara didn’t answer at first. Then a ragged breath escaped her, and the dam broke.

“I miss them,” she whispered, voice cracking like thin ice, “I miss

them so much it hurts to breathe sometimes. I miss the sky and the markets and the way the twin moons looked at night. I miss my friends. I miss being a kid who thought the world was never going to end."

Another tear fell. Then another.

"And I hate them," she went on, the words tumbling faster now, "I hate them for what they turned into. For what they wanted us to become. I hate that every time I close my eyes I see Argo cracking apart, and I couldn't save them. I hate that I'm still here and they're not. I hate that Clark got the perfect family and I got… nothing. Just orders. Just duty."

She lifted her head at last. Her eyes were red-rimmed, raw, but the tears kept coming.

"I hate that he hates me now. I know he does. And I don't blame him. I should've told him. I know I should've. But I was so tired of being the one who carried all the ugly parts. I wanted him to keep the good memories a little longer. I wanted Krypton to still be good."

Lois reached out slowly and laid a hand on Kara's knee. Kara didn't pull away.

"Sometimes," Kara said, voice dropping to almost nothing, "I don't see the point anymore. What's the point of being strong if everyone you love is gone? What's the point of saving a world that isn't yours when the one that was yours is dust? I fly out there, past the moon, past everything, and it's just… empty. And I think maybe it would be easier if I just kept going."

Lois's heart seized. She kept her face calm, but inside she was cataloging every crisis hotline. She squeezed Kara's knee gently.

"You are not alone," she said firmly, "you hear me? You are not alone."

Kara gave a wet, bitter laugh, "feels like it."

They sat in silence for a long minute, the tree lights blinking on, oblivious.

Then Kara wiped her face with the sleeve of her hoodie and looked at Lois with something new in her eyes—dread, maybe. Resignation.

“There’s something else,” she said, “something Clark doesn’t know.”

Lois waited.

“It wasn’t just *his* parents,” Kara said, “mine… mine were just as bad. Worse, maybe. But they weren’t always like that, and that’s what makes it hurt the most. When I was little, they were normal. My dad and I built robots, my mom painted. We had dinners together, laughed at stupid things. But when the council kept ignoring the warnings, when the core started failing and no one would listen… they got desperate. And desperate people do insane things.”

She swallowed hard.

“I overheard them once—my father talking to Uncle Jor. They were finalizing the plans for Kal’s rocket. And they weren’t just sending him away to save him. They were sending him to conquer. To seed a new empire. My father said it like it was noble. Like it was the only way Krypton could survive.”

Lois stayed silent, letting her speak.

Kara’s voice grew quieter, almost ashamed.

“You want to know the worst part?”

Lois wasn’t sure she did, but she nodded anyway.

“My mother… the last time I ever saw her, she pulled me aside. The city was falling apart around us. The ground was shaking. Everyone was dying. And she looked me in the eye and told me that if I made it to Earth—if I found Kal—I had to raise him right. Teach him who he really was. Make sure he fulfilled his purpose.”

Kara’s hands twisted together in her lap, knuckles white.

“And if the bloodline of El was at risk… if there weren’t enough compatible partners… she told me I had to be the one to continue it. With *him*. Because we were the last pure Kryptonians. Because it was my duty.”

Lois felt the air leave her lungs in a rush.

“She said it like it was nothing,” Kara whispered, “‘Breed with him if you must, Kara. Ensure our people live on.’ Not ‘I love you.’ Not ‘I’m proud of you.’ Not ‘Be happy.’ Just… that. And then the ceiling

collapsed and I never saw her again."

The tears were falling freely now, silent and unstoppable.

"They were about to die. And the last thing they could think to tell me was to sleep with my cousin. That's what Krypton came down to in the end. That's all I was to them—a vessel for Krypton's survival."

Lois moved without thinking, sliding from the ottoman to the floor in front of Kara and pulling the younger woman into her arms. Kara stiffened for a heartbeat, then folded, burying her face in Lois's shoulder as the sobs finally broke loose—deep, wrenching, the kind that came from somewhere far below the surface.

Lois held her tightly, one hand stroking her hair, the Christmas lights still blinking softly around them.

"You are so much more than that," Lois murmured into her hair, "you are not what they tried to make you. You're Kara. You're the girl who still saves people even when it hurts. And you are loved—by Clark, by Ma and Pa Kent, by me, by every life you've touched. You are enough exactly as you are."

Kara clung to her like a lifeline, crying until there was nothing left but shaky breaths and the quiet hum of the tree.

The crying eventually ebbed into quiet hiccups, then into the kind of exhausted stillness that comes after a storm. Kara stayed curled against Lois's shoulder, her breathing uneven, fingers loosely clutching the fabric of Lois's sweater as if letting go might send her drifting into the void again. Lois didn't move, didn't rush her. She just held on, one hand steadily rubbing slow circles between Kara's shoulder blades, the Christmas lights still painting soft colors across them both.

When Kara finally pulled back, it was only far enough to wipe her face with both sleeves, leaving fresh streaks through the old soot. She wouldn't meet Lois's eyes.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, "I didn't mean to… unload all that on you."

"Don't," Lois said gently, "don't apologize. Not ever. Not with me."

Kara gave a tiny nod, but it was mechanical, like she didn't quite believe it.

Lois reached for the mug of cocoa on the table and pressed it into

Kara's hands, "drink. Slowly."

Kara obeyed, wrapping her fingers around the ceramic as though the heat was the only real thing in the room. She took a small sip, marshmallows bumping against her lips, and stared into the liquid like it might show her the future.

Lois watched her for a long moment, weighing words she knew would hurt before they could ever help.

"Kara," she began carefully, "you need to talk to Clark."

Kara's head snapped up, "no."

"Hear me out—"

"I can't," Kara's voice cracked again, sharper this time, "you didn't see his face, Lois. You weren't there. He told me to leave. He said he didn't want to see me again. And after what I kept from him—what my parents wanted from both of us—how could he ever look at me without seeing that?"

"He's hurt," Lois said, "he's furious. But he's also carrying the exact same poison you just poured out to me, and he's carrying it alone. He thinks his parents were monsters. He doesn't know yours were too. He doesn't know how deep the rot went."

Kara shook her head stubbornly, "he doesn't want to hear it from me."

"Maybe not right now," Lois conceded, "but he will. Because he's Clark. Because underneath all the anger and the betrayal, he loves you. You're his family—the only person left who remembers Krypton the way he wishes he could."

Kara's eyes filled again, but she blinked hard, refusing to let more tears fall.

"I'm scared," she admitted, so quietly Lois almost missed it, "I'm scared that if I tell him the rest—if I tell him what my mother said—he'll look at me like I'm… tainted. Like I'm part of their plan. Like I could ever—" Her voice broke completely, "what if he believes I might have?"

Lois's expression softened, but her gaze was steady, "would you? If things had gone differently—if you'd landed first, raised him—would you have done it?"

Kara recoiled as if Lois had slapped her. “No,” she spat, fierce and immediate, “I’d die first. I’d rather fly into the sun than become that. They were wrong—sick, twisted—and I hated them for even thinking it. I hated them for putting that on me.”

Lois took Kara’s free hand in both of hers, “then you tell him exactly that. You tell him what you just told me. You tell him because he deserves to know he wasn’t the only one they tried to twist. And because you deserve to stop carrying this alone.”

Kara stared at their joined hands, thumb tracing absently over Lois’s knuckles.

“He’s in Gotham tonight,” Lois continued softly, “he’ll be back tomorrow or the day after. Come here. Or go to the Fortress. Or just wait for him on the roof of the Planet like you used to when you needed him. But don’t let this sit between you any longer. It’s eating you alive.”

Kara was quiet for so long Lois thought she wouldn’t answer at all.

Finally, she whispered, “but what if he turns me away again?”

“Then I’ll be there,” Lois said without hesitation, “and I’ll drag his sorry ass by the ear until he listens. I’ve done it before; I *can* do it again. But I don’t think it’ll come to that. He’s had four months to stew. Four months to realize that losing you hurts worse than being angry at you.”

Kara let out a shaky breath that might have been a laugh or another sob—maybe both.

“I don’t know if I’m strong enough,” she said.

“You are,” Lois replied, “you’re the strongest person I know. You survived Krypton dying. You survived Argo. You survived every day since. You can survive one conversation with your cousin.”

Kara closed her eyes, leaning forward until her forehead rested lightly against Lois’s.

“Thank you,” she said, voice raw, “for… for not treating me like I’m broken beyond repair.”

“You’re not broken,” Lois told her fiercely, “you’re bent pretty far, yeah. But bent isn’t broken. And you don’t have to straighten out

alone.”

They stayed like that for a while, foreheads touching, the cocoa cooling between Kara’s palms, the tree lights blinking on and off like a slow heartbeat.

Outside, the snow kept falling, soft and steady.

Lois woke to pale winter light filtering through the half-open blinds and the faint smell of chilli. For a moment she lay still, listening to the hush of fresh snow muffling the city outside. Then memory returned: Kara on the sofa, the tears, the cocoa, the terrible confession. She sat up quickly, heart already racing.

The living room was empty.

The Christmas tree lights were off—Kara must have unplugged them before leaving. The blanket Lois had draped over her sometime after midnight was neatly folded on the ottoman. On the coffee table sat the second bowl of chili, scraped clean, and the cocoa mug, empty except for a thin ring of dried whipped cream clinging to the bottom like frost.

No note. No goodbye. Just gone.

Lois exhaled slowly, a mix of relief and worry settling in her chest. At least Kara had eaten. At least she’d stayed long enough to sleep a little. But the silence felt heavier now.

She padded to the kitchen, started coffee, and was halfway through pulling on her work clothes—dark slacks, purple blouse, boots for the snow—when the doorbell rang.

Lois frowned; she wasn’t expecting anyone. She crossed to the door and opened it to find Clark standing in the hallway, looking rumpled and exhausted in the same navy suit he’d worn yesterday, tie loosened, top button undone, faint stubble shadowing his jaw. Snowflakes clung to his dark hair. In one hand he held a brown paper bag that smelled of warm yeast and toasted sesame.

“Morning,” he said, offering a tired half-smile as he stepped inside,

“front door this time. Figured I’d act like a normal human for once.”

Lois closed the door behind him and watched as he shrugged out of his overcoat, hanging it on the rack, “you look like you didn’t sleep.”

“I didn’t,” he admitted, moving to the kitchen counter. He set the bag down—Kane’s Bagels, Gotham’s best—and started unpacking it, “but I got a story out of it, so hopefully Perry won’t kill me. Exclusive interview with a Gotham detective, some guy named Gordon, who’s starting to question the department’s stance on the Batman.”

He laid out the waxed paper parcels: bagels heavy with seeds and cream cheese. The normalcy of it felt almost jarring after the night she’d had. Clark glanced around the apartment as he worked, gaze lingering on the folded blanket, the two empty dishes in the drying rack, the faint second indentation on the sofa cushion.

“Lois,” he said quietly, pausing with a bagel halfway out of its wrapper, “was someone here?”

She leaned against the counter opposite him, arms crossed. Might as well get it over with, “Kara.”

Clark froze. The easy morning warmth drained from his face in an instant.

“She came by last night,” Lois continued, “stayed the night. We talked.”

Clark set a bagel down carefully, “what did she say?”

“A lot.” Lois hesitated, then decided gentleness could wait, “she’s hurting, Clark. Worse than we realized.”

He looked away, jaw tight, “I’m sure she is.”

The dismissive edge in his tone—cool, clipped, almost sarcastic—lit a spark in Lois’s chest. After everything Kara had poured out last night, after the raw, bleeding grief she’d witnessed, that single sentence felt like a slap.

“Don’t,” Lois said sharply, “don’t you dare do that.”

Clark’s eyes snapped back to her, startled, “do what?”

“Act like her pain is some inconvenience you can brush off. You didn’t see her last night, Clark. You didn’t hold her while she cried. She’s

been carrying this for years, and she's been carrying it alone."

Clark's expression shuttered, "I'm not the one who kept secrets—"

"Don't you dare speak to me about secrets, Smallville," Lois scoffed, "your whole life is a secret. No, you're the one who told her to leave and never come back," Lois cut in, voice rising, "you're the one who cut her off when she needed you the most. And now she's out there somewhere, terrified you'll never forgive her, convinced she's tainted because of what her mother ordered her to do."

Clark flinched at that, confusion flickering across his face, "what her mother—?"

"You need to hear it from her," Lois stopped him.

He stared at her, shock replacing the defensiveness.

"She's been alone with this for months," Lois went on, quieter now but no less intense, "years, really. And last night she finally broke. She's scared you'll look at her and see what they tried to make her. She's scared you'll hate her forever."

Clark's throat worked as he swallowed. He didn't speak.

Lois stepped closer, "she has no one, Clark. *No one*. You have Ma and Pa waiting in Smallville with open arms. You have me. You have Jimmy, Lombard and, hell, even Perry. Kara has... a dog and, as of last night, apparently me. That's it."

Clark closed his eyes, shoulders sagging under the weight of her words.

"I don't know if I'm ready," he whispered.

Lois's heart twisted, but she didn't soften, "I'm sorry but I don't care. Get ready, Clark. Because she needs you right now. She needs her family. She needs to know she's not the monster her parents tried to create. And you need to hear the full truth from her."

Silence stretched between them.

Finally Clark opened his eyes. They were glassy, but steady, "she left before you woke up?"

Lois nodded.

Clark looked at the empty mug on the counter. After a long moment, he said, voice rough, “I don’t know where to start.”

“You start by being there,” Lois said, “and you listen. *Really* listen. Because if you turn her away again, you’ll lose her for good. And I know you don’t want that.”

Clark’s jaw trembled for a fraction of a second before he got it under control.

“No,” he said at last, “I don’t.”

He reached for the poppy-seed bagel, handed it to her without a word, then started spreading cream cheese on a bagel for himself. His movements were slow, deliberate.

Lois took the bagel, watching him. The anger had ebbed, leaving only ache behind.

“Thank you,” Clark said quietly, not looking up, “for being there for her when I wasn’t.”

Lois gave him a small, sad smile, “that’s what family does, Smallville.”

They ate in silence for a while, the morning light growing brighter around them, snow still drifting past the windows.

Chapter 2

More than a week had passed since that snow-muffled night in Lois's apartment, and Kara had vanished. No calls, no texts, no sudden appearances on the roof of the Daily Planet. Nothing. The only tether keeping Lois from spiraling into full-blown panic was the dog. Krypto would materialize without warning at her place with a joyful bark, or bound into Clark's apartment in the middle of the night, tail wagging hard enough to rattle the picture frames. He'd stay for a day or two, curling up on rugs, begging for treats, then vanish just as abruptly, leaving behind only white hairs on the furniture.

Christmas had passed, but Kara's Christmas presents—small things Lois had picked out with careful optimism—still sat unopened beneath the little tree in her living room. A soft blue scarf that matched Kara's eyes, a leather-bound journal and a framed photo of Clark and Kara with Ma and Pa Kent taken during a rare quiet moment on the Kent farm. They gathered dust now, waiting.

The newsroom at the Daily Planet hummed with its usual post-holiday energy. Lois sat at her desk as she polished a feature on Bibbo Bibbowski, a burly dock worker who'd turned his bar into a makeshift soup kitchen for families displaced by "The Incident." Bibbo was gruff, loud, and unexpectedly kind—exactly the kind of human-interest story Metropolis needed right now. Clark was across town, interviewing Maxwell Lord about his bid to acquire the ruins of LuthorCorp.

Perry had practically salivated when he'd given Clark the assignment.

Lois was deep in a paragraph about Bibbo's famous chili recipe when a loud crash echoed from the bullpen entrance.

She looked up instinctively—and her heart stopped.

Kara stood just inside the doors, looking mortified. She wore baggy jeans that hung low on her hips, scuffed boots, and an oversized gray sweater that swallowed her frame. Her blonde hair was pulled into a messy ponytail, strands escaping around her face. No suit. No cape. Just a young woman who'd clearly not thought through the consequences of walking into the busiest newsroom on the East Coast without a full disguise.

Steve Lombard, the Planet's resident sports writer, was cursing loudly as coffee soaked the front of his shirt. Shards of a ceramic mug—

Lombard's prized "World's Okayest Reporter" gag gift—lay scattered across the floor.

Kara dropped to her knees immediately, gathering pieces of broken china, "aw shoot. I'm sorry—I didn't see you—I wasn't looking—"

"You should watch where you're going!" Lombard barked, dabbing at his shirt with a wad of napkins someone had handed him, "that was a fresh brew! And now my shirt's ruined—do you have any idea how much dry cleaning costs in this city? This is Egyptian cotton!"

Kara winced, murmuring more apologies as she stacked shards in her palm.

Lombard paused mid-rant, squinting down at her. His face shifted from irritation to confusion, "hey, wait a second. You look just like—"

Lois was already moving.

She vaulted from her chair, snatching Clark's spare pair of glasses from her top drawer—the thick-rimmed hypno-glasses he kept for emergencies—and crossed the bullpen in record time. She reached Kara just as Lombard's mouth opened again.

"Hey, Kara! Here are those glasses you were looking for!" Lois announced loudly, sliding the frames onto Kara's face with practiced efficiency. The subtle hypnotic suggestion woven into the lenses did its work instantly, "you know how Clark always keeps a spare pair around for you in case you needs them."

Lombard blinked, frowned, shook his head like a dog shedding water, "huh… could've sworn you looked familiar for a second there. Just… just look where you're going next time, kid." He waved a hand dismissively and wandered off toward the break room, still muttering about his shirt.

Lois grabbed Kara's elbow and steered her quickly through the bullpen toward her desk in the corner, away from the busiest traffic. Heads turned briefly, then returned to screens; the Planet had seen stranger things than a clumsy visitor.

Once they reached relative safety, Kara exhaled shakily, "sorry. I… I forgot. That people would recognise me."

"It's fine," Lois said, lowering her voice, "it was an accident. But yeah —you're recognisable even out of the suit. That face is the same," she

tapped the bridge of the glasses now perched on Kara's nose, "keep these on while you're here. Where are yours?"

Kara shrugged, looking sheepish, "probably at a bar somewhere. I haven't exactly been keeping track."

"We'll get you new ones," Lois's mouth twitched, half worry, half relief, "it's good to see you, Kara."

Kara frowned, "why?"

Lois sat on the edge of her desk, folding her arms, "because you said some pretty worrying things the last time I saw you, Kara. Then you disappeared. If it weren't for Krypto showing up every few days…" She trailed off, throat tight, "well, I don't want to imagine what I would've thought."

Understanding dawned slowly on Kara's face. Her fingers tightened around the broken china pieces still in her hand until Lois gently pried them away and dropped them into the trash.

"You thought…" Kara pulled at the sleeve of her sweater, eyes on the floor, "I'm not going to kill myself, Lois."

The words were quiet, but they landed like a punch.

Lois reached across the desk and squeezed Kara's hand hard enough to make the younger woman look up, "and that's exactly what I needed to hear."

Kara's lips curved in a small, fragile smile—the first real one Lois had seen from her in far too long. It didn't reach her eyes yet, but it was there.

Lois squeezed once more before letting go, "you hungry? There's a decent cart downstairs. My treat."

Kara hesitated. Then she nodded, almost shyly, "yeah. Okay."

Lois grabbed her coat from the back of her chair, "come on."

As they walked, Kara adjusted the borrowed glasses self-consciously, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She looked smaller than usual—shoulders hunched, hands in her pockets—but she was here.

That had to mean something.

Lois led Kara toward the bank of elevators at the back of the bullpen. Kara kept her head down, hands shoved deep into the pockets of her oversized sweater, the borrowed glasses perched on her nose doing their subtle work. A few colleagues glanced up as they passed—curious about the quiet young woman trailing Lane—but no one lingered.

They stepped into the elevator together. Lois hit the button for the lobby, and the doors slid shut with a soft ding, sealing them in the small, mirrored space. For a moment the only sound was the faint hum of cables and the distant clatter of the newsroom fading behind them.

Lois glanced sideways at her companion. Kara's sweater was thin—threadbare at the cuffs, no coat, no scarf, nothing but those baggy jeans and boots against the chill outside.

"How are you not freezing in that?" Lois asked, half-teasing, half-concerned.

Kara gave a small shrug, the motion barely shifting the heavy fabric on her shoulders, "we don't feel the cold like humans do. Not really. Below a certain point it's… noticeable, but it doesn't hurt."

Lois nodded, filing that away with the hundred other small biological differences she'd learned over the years, "lucky you. I feel like I'm heading to the Fortress."

"Where's Clark?" Kara asked suddenly, voice quiet.

"Interviewing Maxwell Lord," Lois replied, "Lord's trying to buy up what's left of LuthorCorp. Clark's probably getting stonewalled and loving every minute of it."

Kara's mouth twitched, the ghost of a smile.

The elevator dinged again and opened onto the cavernous lobby of the Daily Planet building. Cold air swept in from the revolving doors as people came and went, cheeks red from the wind off the bay.

Lois led the way outside, guiding Kara toward the food cart parked at the corner of the block. Steam rose in clouds from the grill: falafel sizzling, fresh pita warming, garlic sauce thick enough to stand a spoon in. They joined the short line. Lois ordered two falafel wraps, one with extra tahini and the other with hot sauce, and a side of fries to share. Kara stood silently beside her.

When they had their food, wrapped in foil and steaming in the cold air, Lois steered them toward a nearby bench half-shielded by a bus stop. They sat, knees almost touching, the city's lunchtime foot traffic flowing around them.

Lois unwrapped her falafel and took a bite, giving Kara space to speak first. When she didn't, Lois decided gentle was the only way forward.

"Did you come to the Planet to see Clark?"

Kara picked at the edge of her wrap, not eating yet. "I don't know," she admitted, "I woke up this morning and… I just started walking. Didn't really plan it."

Lois nodded, chewing thoughtfully.

Kara glanced at her, expression unreadable behind the glasses, "you told him, didn't you?"

"I told him you came by," Lois said carefully, "that we talked. That there were things he needed to hear from you, not me. I didn't give him the details. That's not my story to tell."

Kara exhaled slowly, a small cloud in the cold air, "I figured. He hasn't tried to find me. Not that I made it easy."

"He's giving you space," Lois said, "or trying to. He's working through it. But he knows you need him. And deep down, he needs you too."

Kara finally took a bite of her falafel, chewing slowly. Sauce clung to the corner of her mouth; she wiped it away with the back of her hand like a kid.

"I keep replaying it," she said after swallowing, "the Fortress. The things he said. The way he looked at me."

Lois set her wrap down on the foil in her lap, "he was angry. And hurt. But he's had time now. And he's had me telling him—pretty forcefully, if I may add—that cutting you out isn't the answer."

Kara stared at the traffic passing by—yellow cabs, delivery vans, pedestrians bundled against the wind, "I don't know what to say to him. 'Sorry I kept the fact that our parents were eugenics-obsessed imperialists from you'? 'Sorry my mother's dying words were instructions to sleep with you'?"

Lois winced but didn't look away, "you tell him the truth. All of it. The ugly parts and the parts where you fought against it every step of the way. You tell him you hated them for it."

Kara's fingers tightened around her wrap, "I'm scared he won't believe me."

"Then you keep saying it until he does," Lois replied simply, "or until he's ready to hear it. Either way, you don't disappear again."

Kara looked at her then—really looked—and something in her expression softened.

"You're really good at this," she said quietly, "the tough-love thing."

Lois gave a small, wry smile, "years of practice from being an army brat. That and it comes with dating a boy scout from another planet."

Kara huffed a tiny laugh—the first genuine one Lois had heard from her in months. She took another bite of falafel.

They finished their lunch in companionable quiet, watching snow flurries start to drift down again from a slate-gray sky. When the wraps were gone and the fries reduced to a handful of cold remnants, Lois crumpled the foil and stood.

"Come on," she said, "let's go back upstairs. You can hang out with me at my desk until Clark gets back. Or we can raid the break room for coffee that tastes like battery acid. Your choice."

Kara rose slowly, brushing crumbs from her jeans. She adjusted the glasses again, tucking her hands into her sleeves.

"Okay," she said.

The afternoon slipped by in a strange, almost domestic rhythm. Kara stayed.

She didn't flee after the falafel. She followed Lois back upstairs, kept the borrowed glasses on, and quietly installed herself in the bullpen like she belonged there. Lois set her up with a spare laptop to give her something to do with her hands. Kara scrolled through old articles, occasionally asking quiet questions about Metropolis history.

Around two o'clock, Kara's head snapped up, eyes distant.

"Krypto," she said simply, "he's crying. He thinks I forgot him."

Lois didn't ask how she knew, "go. Come back when you're ready."

Kara vanished—literally, a displacement of air and she was gone. She returned fifty-three minutes later, cheeks flushed from high-altitude wind, hair a little wilder, smelling faintly of barn hay.

"I'd left him with Martha and Jonathan," she explained, dropping back into the chair beside Lois's desk, "they're spoiling him rotten. He wasn't crying, he was begging for more pie."

Lois smiled, "of course they are. Ma's probably got a whole ham bone in the oven for him."

By late afternoon, Kara had migrated to Clark's desk. His chair was bigger, more comfortable, and it spun. She sat in it sideways, one leg draped over the arm, spinning slowly in absent circles while staring at the ceiling. Every few rotations she'd stop, tap a key on his keyboard to keep the screen awake, then start spinning again. The bullpen had mostly accepted her presence—Lois Lane's mysterious visitor, wearing Clark's spare glasses, clearly off-limits for interrogation.

Perry White emerged from his office around four-thirty, coffee in hand, barking for an update on the Lord interview. He stopped dead when he spotted Kara lazily rotating in Clark's chair. His bushy eyebrows climbed toward his hairline, the look on his face a perfect blend of confusion and territorial outrage: Who is this kid and why is she in my bullpen?

Lois caught his eye across the room and gave a tiny shake of her head. Perry's scowl deepened, but he grunted and moved on, muttering something about "damn strays" under his breath.

At five-fifteen, the elevator dinged.

Clark stepped out, tie loosened, coat slung over one arm, notebook tucked under the other. He looked tired, but his stride faltered the moment he saw the bullpen. Specifically, the blonde figure spinning idly in his chair.

Kara stopped mid-rotation, feet dropping to the floor. For a long second, cousin and cousin just stared at each other across the noisy room.

Clark recovered first. He walked over slowly, weaving between desks, until he stood in front of her. Up close, Lois could see the faint tension in his shoulders, the careful neutrality he was forcing onto his face.

“Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey,” Kara replied, voice smaller than Lois had ever heard it.

Clark glanced at Lois, who was pretending to be absorbed in her screen but watching every second, then back to Kara, “it’s… good to see you.”

“You too,” Kara said. She attempted a smile; it wobbled but held.

“I heard Krypto’s at the farm,” Clark continued, setting his coat and notebook on the desk, “Ma called. Said he tried to herd the cows.”

Kara huffed a tiny laugh, “sounds like him.”

Clark nodded, hands in his pockets now, shifting his weight, “how’ve you been?”

The question hung between them, loaded with everything unsaid.

Kara shrugged one shoulder, “okay. Better than… before,” she glanced at Lois again, quick and grateful.

Clark followed her gaze, understanding passing over his face. He looked back at Kara, gentler now, “do you want to go somewhere quieter? Talk?”

Kara’s fingers tightened on the armrests. She nodded, then hesitated, “can Lois come?”

Clark blinked, surprised. Lois immediately leaned forward.

“Kara, sweetheart, you don’t need me there,” she said firmly, “this is between you two. You’ll be fine—”

“No,” Kara interrupted, sharper than intended. She softened instantly, cheeks coloring, “I mean… I want you there. Please.”

Lois studied her—the faint tremor in her hands, the way her eyes flicked nervously to Clark and away again. Clark caught it too. He gave Lois a small, almost imperceptible nod—whatever she needs.

Lois exhaled, “okay.”

Relief washed over Kara’s face so visibly it hurt to watch. She stood up, pushing Clark’s chair back into place, “where?”

“There’s a conference room on the next floor,” Clark said, “rarely used this late. Or the roof, if you want fresh air.”

Kara considered. “Roof,” she decided.

Clark managed a faint smile, “roof it is.”

They moved together—Lois grabbing her coat, Clark slinging his back on, Kara trailing half a step behind, hands still in her sweater pockets. The bullpen had quieted; a few late-shift reporters glanced up curiously, but no one commented. Perry watched from his office door, arms crossed, but for once he kept his mouth shut.

In the elevator, the three of them stood in a loose triangle. No one spoke. The hum of the machinery felt deafening.

When the doors opened onto the roof access, cold air rushed in, sharp with the smell of snow and city. The sky was already darkening, Metropolis’s lights beginning to sparkle below them like scattered jewels. The Daily Planet globe loomed overhead, glowing gold against the twilight.

Clark held the door for both women, then let it close behind them. The roof was empty except for old satellite dishes and a few vents humming quietly.

Kara walked to the edge, stopping a safe distance from the ledge, and wrapped her arms around herself despite claiming earlier she didn’t feel the cold. Lois and Clark followed, stopping a few feet away to give her space.

For a long moment, no one said anything. Wind tugged at their coats. Far below, traffic crawled along the avenues.

Finally Kara turned around. The borrowed glasses caught the globe’s light, hiding her eyes for a second before she reached up and carefully removed them, folding them in her hand.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Clark, voice steady but raw, “for everything I didn’t tell you. For letting you find out the way you did.”

Clark’s throat worked. He took a half-step closer. “I’m sorry too,” he said quietly, “for what I said in the Fortress. For telling you not to come back. I didn’t mean it. I was—” He searched for the word, “upset.”

Kara nodded, eyes glistening but dry, “I know.”

Lois stayed back, arms loosely crossed, anchor and witness both.

“I never told you…” Kara took a shaky breath, “that there’s more. Worse stuff. About my parents too.” Her voice cracked on the last words.

Clark’s face shifted—pain, dread, but also resolve. “I’m listening,” he said, “whenever you’re ready.”

Kara glanced at Lois again, drawing strength from her presence. Then she began to speak. She started small, voice barely carrying over the wind whipping across the rooftop.

“Krypton… it wasn’t always horrible. When I was little, it was beautiful. We had sunrises that painted everything gold. The gardens floated in Kandor. My parents… they were happy. Dad spent days in his lab inventing things that made life easier for people. Mom was a judge, and she helped people. We had family dinners. Jor-El and Lara would come over, and you were this tiny bump in Lara’s belly that everyone fought to feel kick. I thought the world would last forever.”

She smiled faintly at the memory, then let it fade.

“But the core started destabilizing. You know that part. Dad and Uncle Jor-El told the Council for years. They had data, models, projections. They begged them to stop mining so deep. But the Council didn’t want to admit they’d been wrong. They said the science wasn’t conclusive. They buried the reports.”

Kara’s hands tightened into fists inside her sleeves.

“At first, our parents didn’t give up on everyone. They really didn’t. They started a secret project—something like… what do humans call them? An Ark? A fleet of them. Big ones. Enough to carry billions, all of Krypton. They worked night and day, pulling in engineers they trusted, rerouting materials. They were going to save as many as they could, Council be damned.”

Clark’s eyes widened slightly. This was new to him.

“But the Council found out,” Kara continued, voice hardening, “I don’t know how, but they did. They shut it down. Accused Dad and Uncle Jor-El of inciting panic, of treason. They didn’t want the population to know how bad it really was—because then the people might demand

change, might hold them accountable. Better to keep everyone calm and trusting right up until the end."

She looked out over the city lights, voice dropping.

"After that… it was like something broke in them. In all four of them. Krypton's atmosphere started thinning. The quakes got worse. Our orbit around Rao started to decay. And they watched as the Council kept extracting, kept lying.

"They started to believe that only certain bloodlines were worth saving. The ones that had listened. The ones that were *'strong enough'* to carry Krypton forward without repeating the same mistakes. The ancient Houses—the House of El, of Zod, of In-Ze, and others. They said if we let the 'weak' lines survive, it would all just happen again on whatever new world we found."

Kara's voice grew quieter, but no less steady.

"So they scrapped the big ships and started designing smaller ones. Family-sized. Enough for the Houses they deemed worthy. They told themselves they were giving the 'best' of Krypton a future. Dad said it like it was noble. Mom agreed. Aunt Lara… she cried sometimes, late at night, but she went along. And Uncle Jor-El never wavered."

She swallowed hard.

"But time ran out faster than they thought. The Council had doubled down on extraction to keep the grids running as everything was falling apart. Continents started to split apart. The cities started losing power. They realised they couldn't even finish even the family ships. In the end… there was only time for two small pods."

Kara finally looked at Clark fully.

"One for you. One for me."

Clark's breath caught.

"They chose us because we were children," Kara said, "because we could adapt. Because we were the purest continuation of the Houses they wanted to preserve. You were just a baby—everything you believed could be shaped. I was older, old enough to understand my *duty,"* she spat the word, "old enough to… help you later, if it came to that."

Her voice cracked on the last words.

“They didn’t build those pods to save us out of love,” she whispered, “they built them to save their vision. Of a new Krypton, built on their terms, no matter what it took. No matter who we had to become.”

Silence fell, heavy and cold.

Clark stared at her, eyes shining with unshed tears. “I didn’t know,” he said hoarsely, “about the Ark. About any of it. I thought… I thought they were heroes. Just trying to save their children.”

“They were,” Kara said, “at first. And then they weren’t. That’s the worst part—they started good. They wanted to save everyone. But their desperation turned them into something else.”

Lois stepped closer, laying a gentle hand on Kara’s back. Kara leaned into it slightly, like a sailor finding the rail in a storm.

“I hated them for it,” Kara went on, “by the end, I hated them. I watched Kandor crack apart, watched people I loved die screaming, and all I could think was that our parents helped make this happen. That they chose who was worthy and who wasn’t. That they put that on us.”

She looked at Clark again, eyes fierce now.

“They didn’t just want us to survive, Kal. They wanted us to rebuild Krypton exactly the way they thought it should be. Stronger. Purer. Without the weakness that doomed it the first time.”

Her voice grew quieter, but the words carried the weight of years.

“They knew there wouldn’t be enough of us left. Even in their original plan, with whole families escaping, the gene pool would’ve been tiny. So they decided the survivors would have to… ‘sully’ themselves,” she spat the phrase like poison, “that’s what they called it. Sullying. Because humans were ‘animals.’ Primitive. Inferior. But necessary.”

Clark’s face went very still. Lois felt her stomach drop.

“They had lists,” Kara continued, staring at the rooftop gravel as if it might open and swallow her, “genetic profiles they’d put together. The ‘strongest’ specimens with desirable traits. They were going to take them. Not ask. Just take them. Keep them like breeding stock. Slaves, really, who’s sole existence was to sleep with them. To produce

offspring who would carry more Kryptonian blood than human, generation after generation, until we'd finally 'purified' the line again."

Clark made a low sound—half horror, half revulsion.

Kara's hands shook. She wrapped her arms tighter around herself.

"That was the plan when they still thought multiple ships would make it. A new colony. Controlled reproduction. All for the greater good of Krypton's rebirth."

She swallowed hard, the wind tugging at loose strands of her hair.

"Then time ran out."

She couldn't look at him now. Her gaze fixed somewhere past his shoulder, at the glowing Daily Planet globe, anywhere but his face.

"My mother… she pulled me aside right before the end. The city was falling apart. People were dying in the streets. And she looked me in the eye and told me that if we both made it to Earth, I had to make sure the bloodline continued. That I had to raise you to understand your purpose. To rule. To rebuild."

Her voice dropped to barely a whisper.

"And if… if the humans proved too resistant, or if there weren't enough viable partners to grow our numbers quickly… I had to do it myself. With you. Because we were the last. Because it was my duty as a member of the ancient, noble House of El to ensure that Krypton survived, no matter what."

The rooftop went deathly silent.

Kara's eyes were fixed on the ground now, shoulders hunched as if waiting for a blow.

"And then she was dead," she said, voice breaking. "the ceiling was falling in and… and then I never saw her again."

She risked a glance upward—not at Clark's face, but somewhere near his chest.

"I need you to know, Kal, I never would have. Not in a million years. Not if the entire universe depended on it. I'd have flown into the sun first. I'd have died before I ever—before I became that. It made me

sick. It still makes me sick. The fact that she could even say it. That that was her last instruction to me instead of… instead of 'I love you.'"

Her voice cracked completely on the last words. Tears spilled over, tracking down her cheeks in the cold.

"I hated her for it. I hated all of them. And I've spent every day since trying to be nothing like them."

Clark stood frozen for a long moment, processing the full horror of it. Then he moved—slowly, deliberately—closing the distance between them. He reached out and gently took her hands in his, waiting until she finally lifted her eyes to meet his.

There was no disgust in his gaze. No recoil. Only pain—for her, for both of them—and fierce, unwavering belief.

"I know," he said quietly, "I know you wouldn't have. I know you."

Kara searched his face, trembling.

"You're not them," Clark continued, voice steady, "you're the opposite of everything they wanted. You've spent your life here saving people—human people. Caring about them. Fighting for them. You chose that. Even when it would've been easier to walk away."

He squeezed her hands, and told her the words he'd needed to hear months ago.

"*Your* choices, Kara. *Your* actions… *that's* what makes you who you are," Clark said, tears brimming, "and let me tell you something. I could not be more proud of you."

Kara let out a broken sound—half sob, half relief—and folded forward. Clark caught her, pulling her into another embrace, tighter this time.

Lois stood back, giving them space, tears burning in her own eyes. The wind howled softly around the rooftop, carrying away the last echoes of a dead world's madness.

When they finally pulled apart, Kara wiped her face roughly with her sleeve. Clark kept one hand on her arm, grounding her.

The wind had picked up, swirling loose snow across the rooftop in thin white veils, but neither of them seemed to feel it. Lois stayed a

quiet step behind, letting the moment belong to them.

Clark's voice came low, rough with everything he'd been holding back for months.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Kara looked up at him, eyes still red but clearer now.

"I'm sorry I pushed you away," he went on, "that day in the Fortress… I was so angry. Not just at you—at them, at the message, at everything I thought I knew about where I came from. And I turned it on you."

He swallowed, thumb brushing absently over the sleeve of her sweater.

"You needed me. And instead of listening, instead of being there, I told you to leave. I told you I didn't want to see you."

His voice cracked on the last words.

"I was wrong. I was cruel. And I've regretted it every single day since."

Kara stared at him, lips parted like she wasn't sure the words were real.

"I thought you hated me," she whispered.

Clark shook his head fiercely, "never. Not for a second. I was hurt, and scared, and I lashed out. I convinced myself I needed space, but really I was just… running from it. From all of it."

He took a shaky breath.

"You were drowning, Kara. And I threw you an anchor instead of a lifeline. I left you alone with everything you just told me. Everything you've carried since you were a teenager watching your world die."

Tears welled in Kara's eyes again, but she didn't look away this time.

"I should have been there," Clark said, "I shouldn't have pushed you out. You're my family."

He squeezed her arm gently.

"I'm so sorry I made you feel like you had to face that alone."

Kara's chin trembled. She tried to speak, failed, then simply stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him again. Clark returned the embrace instantly, resting his cheek against her hair.

"I was scared too," she mumbled into his coat, "scared you'd never forgive me. Scared you'd never look at me the same way."

"Never. I'd never have thought you'd do that," Clark confessed.

They stood like that for a long minute, the city humming far below them, the globe's golden light washing over them both.

When Kara finally pulled back, she managed a watery smile, "fuck, we're kind of a mess, huh?"

Clark huffed a soft laugh, wiping at his own eyes, "yeah. But we're a mess together now."

Lois stepped forward then, unable to stay on the sidelines any longer. She slipped an arm around Kara's shoulders from one side, and Clark mirrored her from the other, the three of them forming a small, unbreakable circle.

"You're both allowed to be messes," Lois said quietly, "I think you've earned it."

Kara leaned into her slightly, then into Clark on the other side.

"I missed you," she said to him, voice small but steady, "I missed my cousin."

"I missed you too," Clark replied, "more than I knew how to say."

The wind eased, as if the night itself had been waiting for this moment. Snow continued to fall in gentle silence, dusting their hair and shoulders. Somewhere below, Metropolis kept moving—taxis honking, lights flickering, people living their ordinary, extraordinary lives.

Up on the roof, the three of them lingered a little longer, no one quite ready to break the fragile peace that had settled over them. Eventually Lois shivered—human after all—and Clark wrapped an arm around her waist.

"Let's go home," he said quietly.

Kara nodded, exhaustion etched into every line of her face. The

emotional weight of the conversation had drained her more thoroughly than any battle ever could.

Clark scooped Lois into his arms with familiar ease; she looped her arms around his neck without protest. Kara lifted off beside them, silent, steady. They rose above the Daily Planet globe, above the glittering sprawl of the city, and turned west. The flight was short and wordless—just the rush of cold air and the soft glow of streetlights far below.

They landed on the fire escape outside Lois's apartment—technically still hers on the lease, but Clark hadn't spent a full night in his own place across town in weeks. The windows were dark except for the faint multicoloured shimmer of the Christmas tree lights she'd left on a timer. Clark slid the window open, letting Lois step inside first, then Kara, then himself.

The apartment was warm, quiet, smelling faintly of pine and the cinnamon candle Lois had burned the night before. Kara paused in the living room, looking suddenly very young and very tired. She toed off her boots by the door, left them in an untidy heap, and without a word walked straight through to the bedroom.

Lois and Clark watched her go. A moment later they heard the soft creak of the mattress as Kara simply folded onto it, face-down, still fully dressed. She didn't bother with blankets; she was asleep almost before her head hit the pillow, one arm dangling off the edge.

Lois met Clark's eyes. They both knew better than to disturb her.

Lois slipped off her coat, hung it on the rack, and padded into the kitchen. She pulled three mugs from the cupboard—habit—then set one back when she remembered Kara was already out. Milk went into a saucepan, chocolate into the mugs. She stirred slowly, letting the routine ground her after the intensity of the rooftop.

Clark followed her in, silent until he was right behind her. His hands settled on her hips, turning her gently. Before she could ask what he was doing, he cupped her face and kissed her—deep, slow, deliberate. Not urgent, not hungry, but full of something Lois felt all the way to her toes. When they finally parted, Lois was a little breathless. She rested her forehead against his, eyes still closed.

"Well damn, Smallville. What was that for?" she murmured.

Clark's thumbs brushed along her cheekbones.

“Thank you. For being there for her when I wasn’t,” he said, voice low and rough with gratitude, “for doing what I should have done. You held her together when I was being stupid.”

Lois opened her eyes, searching his face in the soft kitchen light.

“I didn’t do anything special,” she said.

“You did everything special,” he countered, “you gave her a safe when I took hers away. You pushed me when I needed pushing.”

He kissed her again, softer this time, lingering.

“I love you,” he whispered against her lips, “for all of it.”

Lois felt her throat tighten. She slid her arms around his waist, pressing close.

“She’s family,” Lois said simply, “that’s what we do for family.”

Clark nodded, resting his chin on top of her head.

The milk on the stove began to steam gently. Lois reached back to turn off the burner, then poured it carefully into the two remaining mugs. She added marshmallows—extra for Clark, because he loved them—and handed him one.

They carried their cocoa into the living room, settled on the couch beneath the glow of the tree lights, and sat shoulder to shoulder, listening to the quiet rhythm of Kara’s breathing from the bedroom.

Outside, snow kept falling, blanketing the city in hush.

Inside, the apartment felt fuller than it had in months.

Chapter 3

Lois woke slowly, the pale gray light of dawn filtering through the apartment blinds. Her neck ached from the awkward angle on the sofa, and a blanket—Clark's doing, no doubt—had been tucked around her sometime in the night. She stretched, wincing, and realized the living room was empty. No Clark beside her, no soft breathing or warm presence. The Christmas tree lights had timed out, leaving the room in muted shadows.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes. The clock on the wall read just after seven. Perry would be expecting her in the bullpen soon, waiting for her to finish her article.

Lois glanced around. Clark's Superman suit was draped carelessly over the back of an armchair, the red cape trailing onto the floor like discarded laundry. Not off saving the world, then. She frowned, a small knot of curiosity forming in her gut.

From the bedroom came the unmistakable rumble of snoring—loud, unapologetic, like a distant thunderstorm. Kara. Lois smiled faintly. Lois and Clark had stayed up late on the sofa, talking in low voices about everything and nothing, until sleep had claimed them too.

Lois stood, padding quietly to the kitchen. She started a pot of coffee, the familiar gurgle and aroma grounding her in the morning routine. While it brewed, she grabbed her phone from the counter, scrolling through notifications.

First, an email from Perry caught her eye: *"Lane—take it easy on your personal day. Kent already called in the family emergency. Tell him to send the Lord piece to Olsen for proofing. And tell Kent to stop being such a Boy Scout. —White."*

Lois blinked. Personal day? Family emergency? She hadn't requested time off.

Then came the social media alerts—dozens of them, buzzing in from her curated feeds. Twitter (or X, as it insisted on being called) was ablaze with posts about a "strange new superhero" spotted over Metropolis and beyond. Grainy photos, shaky videos, breathless captions.

She tapped one: a blurry image of a figure soaring over the Atlantic,

pulling a listing cargo ship back to stability amid crashing waves. The man—or whatever he was—wore a weathered leather flight jacket, zipped tight against the wind, with an old-fashioned bomber hat crammed over dark hair and blacked-out goggles shielding his eyes. No cape, no emblem, just a makeshift aviator look that screamed 1940s pulp hero.

Lois's breath caught. She zoomed in on the photo, heart skipping. The jawline. The build. The effortless power in the way he gripped the ship's hull. Clark. No doubt about it. But why the getup? Why not the suit?

Before she could spiral further, the window slid open with a soft whoosh. Clark stepped inside, snowflakes melting in his hair, the bomber hat tucked under one arm and goggles dangling from a strap. He closed the window quietly, glancing toward the bedroom where Kara's snores still echoed.

"Morning," he said softly, crossing to her. He looked windswept but steady, the leather jacket creaking as he moved.

Lois set her phone down, arms crossing, "you bailed."

He winced apologetically, "sorry. There was a cargo ship sinking in the Atlantic. Coast Guard called it in, but they couldn't get there in time. I didn't want to wake you or Kara."

She nodded, understanding flickering through her, "and the 'family emergency' with Perry?"

Clark rubbed the back of his neck, "yeah… about that. I called him early. Told him we needed the day. He grumbled, but as long as I send the Lord interview to Jimmy for proofing, we're good."

Lois raised an eyebrow, "I 'spose you didn't want Kara alone today."

He met her eyes, sincere, "I thought she'd want us *both* here. Not just me. After last night… she needs you just as much as she needs me."

Lois felt a warmth bloom in her chest. She stepped closer, poking at the leather jacket's lapel, "okay, Ace. But what's with the new look? Very 1940s flyboy."

Clark chuckled, a tired but genuine sound, "this was my grandpa's old Air Force gear. It was the first thing I grabbed. Fits the bill for staying low-key."

“Low-key?” Lois teased, “you’re trending as ‘Mystery Aviator Man.’ Half the city thinks you’re a new hero.”

He sighed, shrugging out of the jacket and hanging it over the armchair beside his suit, “I didn’t think that far ahead.”

Lois poured two mugs of coffee, handing him one. She leaned against the counter, studying him, “why not the suit, Clark?”

His expression shifted—vulnerable, conflicted. He stared into his mug, steam rising between them.

“I don’t know if I can anymore,” he confessed quietly, “not after what Kara told me. Wearing that crest… knowing what our parents expected us to do. What they wanted us to become…”

Lois’s heart twisted. She set her mug down, reaching for his hand.

“It’s tainted now,” Clark continued, voice low, “every time I look at it, I see their plan. Their madness. So I was thinking… I’ll have the Superman robots make me a new suit. Something without it. Plain. And then I’m going to the Fortress to remove the crest from everything. The walls, the consoles, the whole damn place.”

“Don’t.”

The voice came from the bedroom doorway—soft but firm. Kara stood there, hair mussed from sleep, still in yesterday’s sweater and jeans. She looked pale, eyes puffy, but resolute as she stared at Clark.

“Don’t take it down,” she repeated, stepping into the kitchen, “keep it up.”

Clark turned to her, surprise etched on his face, “Kara… how can I? After what they did? What they planned for us?”

She shook her head, “we have to remember what it was supposed to mean. Not what they twisted it into. I won’t let them ruin that for me, too.”

Lois stayed silent, letting her speak.

“The symbol of the House of El is supposed to stand for hope,” Kara said, voice gaining strength, “and embodied within that hope is the fundamental belief in the potential of every person to be a force for good. That’s what our grandfather, Seg-El, taught me before he joined

with Rao. He said it was about lifting others up. About choosing kindness, even when it's hard to."

She met Clark's eyes, unflinching.

"Our parents forgot that, Kal-El. They let their desperation turn it into something ugly. But here—on Earth—that symbol means something. People see it and they feel safe. It's all some people have. It's what gives them hope."

Clark opened his mouth, closed it again, doubt flickering.

"I saw the news footage from Jarhanpur," Kara pressed on, "even after everything—after Luthor showed the message, after nearly everyone turned against you—the people there still looked at that symbol and felt hope. So much hope they were willing to stand up against an army, using our crest as their flag. *That's* what our symbol is *supposed* to stand for."

Lois watched Clark's face soften, the weight of her words sinking in.

"Please don't erase it," Kara said quietly, "wear it. Own it. Make it mean what it should have always meant. Otherwise… otherwise they win."

Clark stared at her for a long moment, then nodded slowly, "okay."

Kara gave a small, relieved smile. She crossed the kitchen and poured herself a mug of coffee, the three of them falling into an easy silence as the morning light grew brighter. Lois glanced between them and felt a quiet certainty settle in her bones. Whatever came next, they'd face it together.

The coffee steamed. Kara sipped hers black. Clark added milk to his. And outside, Metropolis stirred awake, none the wiser to the quiet revolution in a small apartment above the streets.

The morning of January 6th, 2026, was cold and bright in Metropolis. Ten-year-old Maya Patel skipped along the sidewalk, her purple backpack bouncing with every hop. She was playing her favorite game: hopscotch on the cracks. One foot, two feet, jump, spin. If she

made it to the corner without stepping on a line, she'd get an A on today's spelling test. That was the rule she'd made up last week, and it had worked twice already.

The streets were busy the way Metropolis mornings always were—delivery trucks double-parked, vendors shouting about fresh bagels, grown-ups hurrying with coffee cups in gloved hands. Maya hummed to herself, breath puffing white in the air, braids swinging under her knit hat. She hadn't seen her dad before leaving; he'd been closed in his home office since six, headset on, voice low on a conference call. He'd waved through the cracked door and mouthed "Love you, kiddo," and that was enough.

She was three blocks from school, mid-hop, when the sky exploded.

A boom rolled across the city like thunder made of metal. Maya stumbled, landing hard on both feet. Everyone around her froze. Heads tilted upward. Another boom followed, deeper, shaking the pavement under her sneakers.

High above the avenue, something enormous glinted in the sun—a giant robot, taller than most of the buildings around it, all sharp angles and glowing red eyes. Its arm swung in a wide arc, sending a shockwave that rattled windows for blocks.

Maya's mouth fell open. She'd seen fights like this on TV, but never this close, never real.

Then she saw them: the Justice Gang. Green Lantern streaked across the sky in a trail of emerald light, his ring blazing. He shouted something Maya couldn't hear, and a massive glowing sledgehammer formed in his hands, the size of a city bus. He brought it down with both arms. The impact rang like a church bell struck by lightning. The robot staggered backward, metal screeching.

Straight toward the skyscraper Maya was walking beside.

The building shuddered. Glass panes burst outward in glittering sheets. Steel groaned. Chunks of façade—concrete, rebar, entire window frames—began to rain down like deadly hail.

People screamed.

The spell broke. Everyone started running at once, a stampede of coats and briefcases and terror. Maya ran too, heart hammering in her throat, backpack slapping against her spine. But she was small, only

ten, and the grown-ups were bigger, faster, panicked. Elbows knocked her sideways. Someone's briefcase clipped her shoulder and sent her spinning. She hit the pavement hard, palms stinging, tears springing to her eyes.

She scrambled up, looking for a gap in the crowd, but there was none.

Then she heard it: a low, grinding crack from above.

She looked up.

A slab of the building's corner—tons of concrete and twisted metal—had broken free. It tumbled end over end, slow at first, then faster, falling straight toward her. There was no time to move. No space. Nowhere to go.

Maya froze.

In that endless second, a thousand things flashed through her mind: her dad's tired smile last night when he'd checked her math homework, the new kitten poster she'd hung in her room, the spelling words she still hadn't studied, the fact that she hadn't told her dad she loved him out loud this morning.

She squeezed her eyes shut and braced for the impact.

It never came.

Instead, there was a swoosh—sharp, powerful, like the world inhaling. A shadow passed over her. Something enormous stopped overhead with a deep, resonant thud.

Maya opened her eyes.

A broad red-and-yellow S filled her vision, inches from her face, stretched across a blue suit that looked impossibly bright against the gray morning. She tilted her head back, and back farther, until she met warm blue eyes and a gentle smile.

Superman.

He was holding the massive slab of building above his head with one hand, arm steady, as if it weighed nothing at all. Dust and small pebbles rained off it, pattering harmlessly around them.

"Hey there," he said softly, voice calm and kind, "you okay?"

Maya couldn't speak. She nodded, wide-eyed.

Superman's smile widened, "good. Hang on just a second."

Then she felt arms—strong, careful arms—slide around her from behind. She looked down: another blue suit, another S-shield, this one on a woman with blonde hair. Supergirl crouched beside her, expression just as gentle as her cousin's.

"Let's get you somewhere safe, sweetheart," Supergirl said.

Before Maya could answer, those arms lifted her—gently, effortlessly—until her feet left the ground. The world tilted, and then they were rising, up past the falling debris, up past the screaming crowd. The air was colder up here, whipping at Maya's cheeks, but Supergirl's arms were warm and steady. Maya clung to her instinctively, fingers twisting in the fabric of the cape.

Below them, the street looked tiny. People were still running, but Superman darted from spot to spot—catching a falling streetlight here, shielding a family there, guiding others toward safety with calm gestures. Maya watched it all, heart still racing, but the terror was ebbing, replaced by something she couldn't name yet.

Supergirl flew them two blocks away, landing softly on the sidewalk. She set Maya down but kept a gentle hand on her shoulder until she was sure the girl's legs wouldn't buckle.

"You're okay," Supergirl said again, crouching to eye level, "you're safe now."

Maya looked from her to the sky, where Superman was now helping Hawkgirl wrench a massive arm off the robot. Then back to the matching S on Supergirl's chest.

"You both have the same logo," she said, voice small but wondering.

Supergirl smiled, "that's 'cause we're a family."

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